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Healthier kids for 20c a day

By [Isaac Davison](#)

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The price of battling obesity in New Zealand could be just 20c a day per child, according to analysis of a new programme which has shrunk the number of overweight children across an entire district.

A draft report on Project Energize in the Waikato found that five years after its introduction, children involved in the fitness and healthy eating schedule had thinner waists and could run faster on average than those not in the programme.

In addition, the number of overweight and obese children aged between 7 and 11 dropped 3 per cent.

The team behind the project now wants to see it extended to other areas around the country.

Lead author Elaine Rush, Professor of Nutrition at Auckland University of Technology, said the results showed something broader than improved children's fitness – they were indicative of a complete shift in the community.

"We're talking about region-wide Waikato here. It is the heartland of New Zealand – it has a high percentage of Maori, is relatively poor ... and against all forces, here we are, actually showing that things are moving in the right direction.

"I can't think of any programmes in the world that have kept up the impetus for so long."

She said the results were all the more remarkable because they came against a backdrop of a struggling economy, when the price of healthy food rose disproportionately to the cost of processed and unhealthy products.

The obesity intervention programme, contracted to Sport Waikato, has grown to include 44,000 children.

Twenty-seven "Energizers" and a dietitian work alongside teachers and students in encouraging physical activities and healthy diets.

The report came from a representative study of 5136 children at 192 schools.

It found that 6-to 8-year-olds' waistlines were 2.3cm smaller on average compared with Waikato kids in 2006. In children aged 9 to 11, waistlines were 4.7cm smaller.

It also discovered that children in the programme ran 550 metres 20 seconds faster than children



Katie Quirke and her mother Pam Quirke of Te Mata School are keen supporters of Project Energize. Photo / Paul Estcourt

measured in other parts of New Zealand between 2001 and 2007.

"That's a huge improvement in ability to function," said Professor Rush. "Ability to run is such a basic human ability. If the co-ordination is going so well, then so many other things must be too."

Seven-year-old kids were 4.5 per cent less overweight this year compared with Waikato children in 2006.

The cost of these developments was \$40 a child each year – about 20c for each school day.

The report's authors projected that the healthcare cost saved by early intervention was \$1.50 for every \$1 invested for girls. For Maori girls, the rate of return was \$1.73 for every \$1.

Principal Pam Quirke, who heads the small rural Te Mata School, pinned the success of the programme on its emphasis on the big picture.

She said good diet was a crucial precursor to academic performance, and she had observed a marked difference in her 86 students' attendance and ability since Project Energize began four years ago.

"Once their brains were healthy, then they could learn. Children became much more in control of themselves. Behaviour across the school improved out of sight."

Parents, teachers and the food industry were all challenged to influence children's healthy living.

"We [teachers] run with the kids on cross-country. And our morning teas have certainly changed. Instead of cakes and muffins we have celery sticks and rice crackers. Most of the staff are healthy and active as well."

The positive report on the district health board-funded programme has been welcomed by healthcare groups.

Fight the Obesity Epidemic director Robyn Toomath said many projects aimed at weight reduction had been initiated, but few were as carefully assessed as Project Energize.

Professor Rush said the next step was spreading the programme nationwide.

"There are lots of players in this – the food industry, town planning, political parties, the price and availability of food, and the support we have for our children.

"We talk glibly about health and education being important but let's target it now.

"Let's target the future parents of New Zealand."

Whole school changing for the better

The chips, orange juice and chocolate biscuits in Katie Quirke's lunchbox have been replaced by fruit, filled sandwiches and water.

But the 11-year-old Te Mata School pupil doesn't mind. After four years under obesity-fighting programme Project Energize, she is an evangelist for its benefits.

"My results in reading, writing and maths have improved each year, because I know how to prepare my brain for learning. My brain needs healthy food and lots of water and a good sleep."

The Raglan girl also noticed the changes in friends and classmates.

"Our classrooms have been a bit more settled from quite a few years ago. It calms everyone down. Because some people weren't eating breakfast, [and] some people were eating [junk food]."

She said it was an easy shift to make when the entire community was making the same changes.

Parents were urged to feed kids breakfast, and teachers joined in the physical activities. Water coolers in classrooms encouraged better hydration during the day.

The education provided by supervisors for the programme was extensive – kids were taught to read food packaging to understand what the healthy ingredients were.

Katie's mother, Te Mata principal Pam Quirke, said the changes involved taking tough stances on junk food such as lollies.

Project Energize

* Children involved in Project Energize: 44,000 in 244 schools * Annual cost per child: \$40 * Drop in obesity since 2005: 3% * Reduction in children's waistlines: 2cm to 5cm smaller * Speed of 550-metre run: 20 seconds faster than a comparable group of children * Long-term return on investment: \$1.50 for every \$1 spent.

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